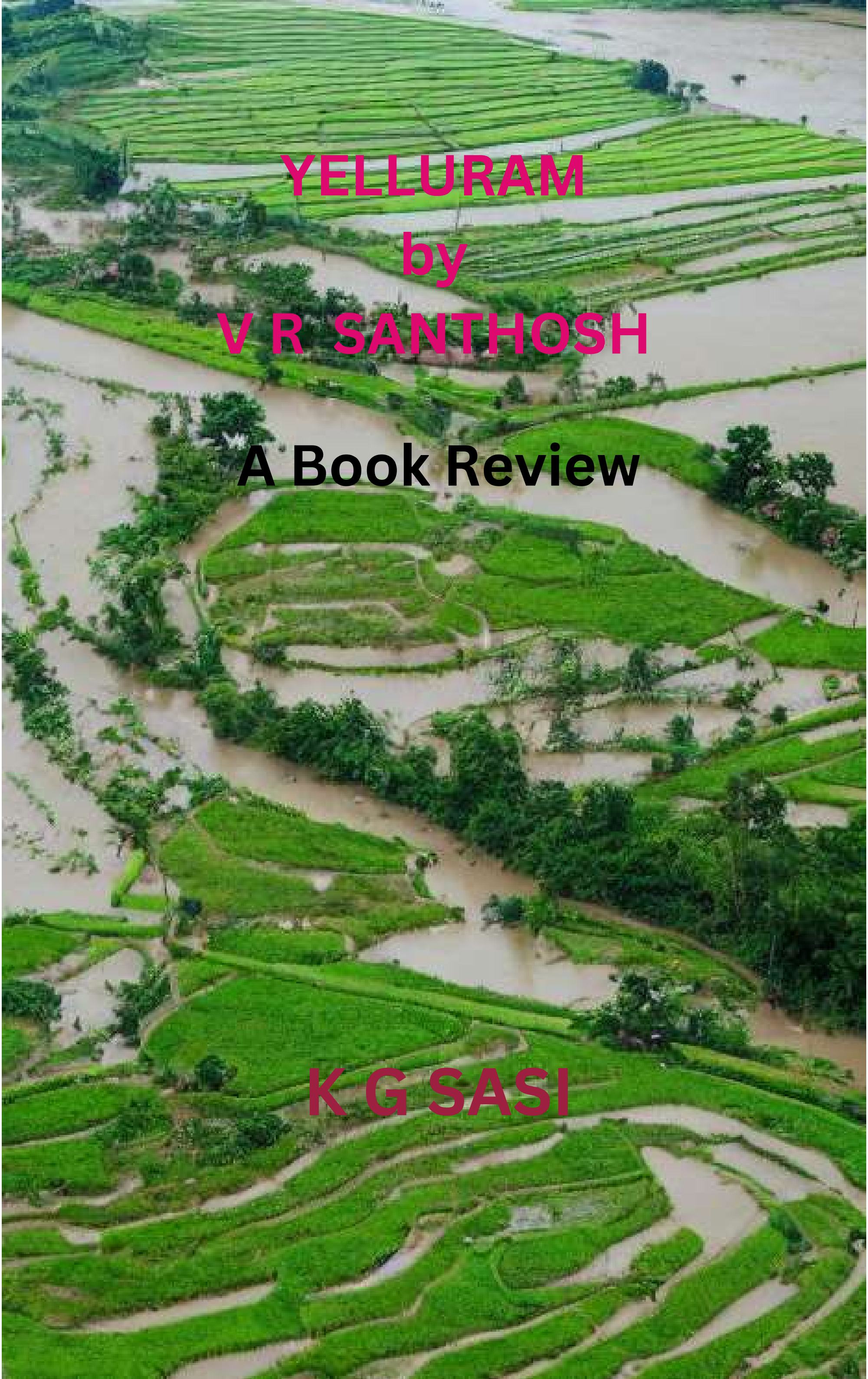


YELLURAM
by
V R SANTHOSH

A Book Review

K G SASI

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To my dear friend
V R Santhosh, the author

YELLURAM BY V R SANTHOSH: A BOOK REVIEW

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FOREWORD

V R Santhosh is a well known poet, translator, painter and critic in Kerala. He has written his first novel in 2022. It was brought out by Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode. This Malayalam novel has 112 pages.

Yelluram is a novel in two parts; the first part from chapters 1 to 15 and the second part chapters 16 to 27. The first part functions as the basic text and the second part as a deconstruction of Yelluram by its Reader. Together they make a delicious reading experience producing a new aesthetics and sensibility. This novel opens a new Trend in Indian novel literature.

This book review is written for academic purpose.

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AN ENTRY INTO YELLURAM

All songs of Tiruppavai of Andal end in the phrase ‘yel or en pavay.’ Scholars say that the words ‘en pavay’ mean ‘my dear maiden friend.’ The etymological meaning of ‘yel’ is ‘to agree’ and of ‘or’ is ‘to understand.’ The word ‘yel’ is derived from a linguistic evolution of ‘el.’ The story of Yelluram of V R Santhosh revolves around the word ‘el’ that signifies a circular meaning ring of love, consent, fire, sun, sunset and night.

Surrounded by rivers at its three sides, Yelluram resembles any peninsular landscape in the world including the village where the novelist is born and has lived as a young man. The village population of 25000 is a selective random sample of the contemporary world. The uninhabited river islet where two rivers merge at the village is symbolized as a boat that spies Yelluram perpetually.

The novelist is drawing a geography for the lost histories of the lives of the loreless people of Yelluram who are lowered into mere passive victims. He makes the cartograms of Yelluram not by stones, soil, cement, mountains or rivers, but by beating heart, blood, sweat, truth and tears. This cartogram is a true cross-section of Kerala!

NARRATOLOGY

There are five narrators in this novel of which a triadic individuality of the narrator is split up into those of the Cartographer, the Reader and the Author. A three dimensional narratology indeed!

CHARACTER NAMES

There is a willful attempt by the author to secularize the proper names used in this novel. The characters are having Mesopotamian, European and Latin-American tainted names as well as those of Indian origin. Often it is very difficult to distinguish between masculine and feminine names as they do not strictly support Indian grammatical case endings.

YELLURAM AS A WOMB

Yelluram is a novel with cartographical references, but the pathways start from bottom to top as in a womb, i.e. from south to north against the cartographical principle of north at the top. All journeys in Yelluram start from south, the direction of the mythical destination of death, to north, the land of the gods, but always forced to deviate by the influence of water-ghosts from one river to another and from source to womb, naturally fit for a people suppressed in a cartograph.

The people sent to their origins have no spatial realm. However, the novel provides them a suppressed space limited between three hills and two rivers, with the fertile paddy lands in the middle, pathways resembling arteries and veins as in a womb, surrounding waterlogs, a temple, two churches, many schools, and a crossroad

junction inside. Yelluram in another sense is the womb where all the characters in Yelluram are born.

The land divides its people into four classes; one of fishermen and illegal brewers, the next of the heavily built scoundrels, the third of carpenters and coolies and the final of the cattle breeders.

The unmarked and suppressed gynospaces of all those groups await an imminent outburst. Everywhere the people are sick and their only cure is hard work. Only the most helpless go away from the village, practically dead from the people's memories.

PROPHETIC ELEMENTS

The sole person whom women of Yelluram could depend upon was their prophet Mittel. He foresees the day when all boats enter the water simultaneously, warring in the river and dying drowned in the salt water.

Year who visited Yelluram for a sociological research knew every individual there personally. He used to write, "Yelluram: The Destruction of Masculinity." Year was a victim rescued from a waste bin when he was a nine month infant. He is in search of the history of the hungry people having nothing. He thinks that the history of Yelluram should start from women. When women tell gynocentric stories, history will be flooded by the sea. He imagined that men would float in the sea. He wrote, "Yelluram is an unknown land, its face is unknown too." The erasure of masculinity is thus prophesied throughout the novel.

REVOLUTION

Yelluram contains descriptions of many local revolutions. Strangers arrived at Yelluram with walls, JCBs and materials for flat construction. Instantly posters and banners appeared in the streets. Cattle mooed when they could get no more fresh grass. Youngsters protested and old men started chattering about developments yet to come.

Aravan, the revolutionary and his friends observed everything carefully. People heard sounds of slamming doors that night. The next morning, the strangers and their JCBs disappeared. Apparu then raised the slogan, "Yelluram to the people of Yelluram." Their revolution was full of imagination and fantasy.

Balutta would count stars every night and accompany them to lead revolutions and return back with injuries. He had given up everything for the revolutionary movement lead by K Venu. One day he was nabbed and interrogated. On release from jail, he was found silent. On the day he spoke in darkness, he went missing again. Tero found him one day addressing the sky. Thereafter people wondered seeing Balutta travelling along with the stars.

Later Echan said that he saw a head cut off from its body. Police dogs came. Chemappan said that he saw another cut off head. The murdered men did not belong to the village. People began to gossip. Srampi said that the bodiless heads floated in the river as well. All the beings in Yelluram felt horrified.

Strolling Nochan saw a notice on the wall of Srampi declaring a revolution. Nochan, Tattu, fisherman Keru, Nochan's wife, Appiri and others talked in low voice. There was a rumour that the murderers were the villagers. Nochan took all the three heads in his boat and threw them away, one in the river, another in the marsh of Maron and the third in a pit between the rocks. Then he washed the boat and returned to the land to find three men near him. He said, 'Police,' entered his room and closed the door.

Mattiri, wife of Appiri found him uneasy. He thought that the map drawn by his daughter was Yelluram. Headless corpses! He wept in agony holding his dear daughter close to him. The revolution and its bitterness and horrors are a major theme in Yelluram.

VICTIMIZATION

Victimizations of many modes are depicted in Yelluram. Nechondi, the canoe man would patiently listen to the stories of all villagers when they come to his canoe for crossing the river. The story of the imminent arrival of the ferry aroused nightmares in Nechondi, especially about abandoning his family. When the ferry came at last, nobody could see Nechondi anywhere, but only his abandoned canoe drifting on the waters.

There was a white needle pierced inside Pananta, the beautiful intelligent educated romantic girl of Yelluram when she was raped inside an unfamiliar car and was thrown out at the veranda of a closed shop. She went mad thereafter and started searching for the needle everywhere hallucinating that it was the needle that pierced her virginity.

The sighting by Aka of the girl who was taken to the coconut garden by four drunkards, the story of Naratta of her masculine wounds, the numerous tales of abandoned brides and the pitiless erasure of the histories of other inhabitants are just a small sample of the victims portrayed in Yelluram.

TALES OF MASCULINITY

When Mukkaru, the headman of the cycle circus men performed wonderful masculine skills, the women of Yelluram started not to allow their husbands to make love with them. When the circus party left, Kocherna, wife of Keechan was also missing. After enquiry on a complaint received on her missing, the Police filed a report that neither Mukkaru nor the cycle circus men existed.

Wherever Milkman Nedumpan hailing from another land went for milking, the women of the households would give birth to his children. Nobody ever knew the secret. Even after the cows stopped milking, Nedumpan would visit his children. At the age of eighty, he felt depressed on having lost his procreative powers and voluntarily cut off his own penis.

SEX WORKER NARATTA

The lonely sex worker Naratta would brood over her masculine wounds every day, in the light of her kerosene lamp make a fish curry, have her meals and sleep after consuming some liquor. She was awakened one midnight to see Titti, wife of missing Pazhutan at her door steps and could not conceive the meaning of it.

One day Naratta cried while in bus, thinking why Talayi could not reveal his love towards her. She decided

to stop that day's work. When the midnight arrived the bride inside her came out in search of the key to Yelluram. When she looked into the river from the bank, she saw herself sitting in a big boat in the river. She woke up very late next day. There was no groom beside her.

Even though the groom was missing, she did not go back to her paternal home. Her dreams repeated. At last when she went out to the river in the daylight, she saw a corpse eaten by fish. Darkness had already fallen over her.

LESBIAN ELEMENTS

Sex worker Naratta's encounter of Titti at her door steps at the midnight is also a key to Yelluram. Aka would walk outdoors in the night. One day she saw a girl sitting beside four or five men drinking liquor. Then they took the girl to the nearest coconut groves. When everything was over, Aka saw the girl groaning took her on her shoulders and walked singing a revolutionary song by Brecht. Aka then grasped and embraced the girl. The next day Era saw two girls lying in the paddy field, roused them and sent them to their homes.

NIGHT WALKS

The pathways, surrounding rivers, bitter sugarcanes, mangroves and trees inside Yelluram often turn into humans. Dusk, night and dawn become places. The immoral night walks form cause, truth, and reality and retell the entire life anew.

The night walks of Kandotti, Pazhutan, Titti, Balutta, Mural, Kapyan, Aka, the raped girl, etc. are important functional elements of this novel. Though men

were doing night walks originally, women gradually took over that function in search of their identities.

FANTASIES

Balutta's revolution with the stars is a fantasy. No one except Mural and Kapyan, the thieves believed Patiran's version that wings began to sprout on the trees that had given fruits for children and coconuts for the grownups. When beaten by the tress they travelled mutually unattainable distances.

An imaginary realm was created by Thaykkaran and illegal brewers. Excise raids became routine in Yelluram. Thaykkaran's mother's memories were lost, his son attained early old age and his wife died. Thaykkaran in his siesta dreamt that his wife was floating in the jaggery wash with a heavy stone firmly tied around her corpse. Thaykkaran never arose again from his sleep. Was he that stone?

MADNESS AND HALLUCINATION

Kandotti saw a nightmare on the dawn of his first sight of the cartographer's boat, that the boys of the village were kidnapped and taken outside Yelluram in boats. In the next midnight Pazhutan could not locate the boat even after rowing after it for long. He was lost in the vast waters and could see entire Yelluram moving in a paper as big as the wide river itself. Titti, Pazhutan's wife went out in her husband's attire for a night walk, was awestruck to see Pazhutan sitting with another woman in a boat in the middle of the river and wondered who that woman was. She found herself knocking at the door of sex worker Naratta.

Balutta's madness marked with companionship of the revolutionary stars is another instance of glorified madness.

Mural and Kapyan, the thieves had the hallucination that they were beaten by the winged trees and when the trees kicked them, they travelled mutually unattainable distances. This is an allusion to the two thieves crucified with Son of Man. They were separated to hell and heaven as in the separation of Mural and Kapyan to mutually unattainable distances.

The hallucination of mad Pananta about the rapist white needle is more about memory of pain than of shame.

The Reader who was an inmate of a sanatorium after the denial of nuptial love was also bluntly accused as mad by his wife. His madness got cured only when he decided to own those who had nobody to possess. Meanwhile the Reader was possessed by the already dead cartographer.

Amatayi Amma came to tell stories to the wife of Thopparu. A man from the picture came out and planted all the trees. When he claimed the land, it was not given to him. Then the entire agricultural ventures failed. A girl died in an accident. Her father was found hanged. His wife died six months later. Then quarries began to function there. They also saw the recently wedded wife of the son of Chulatti hanging on a tree. The bride came running on hearing Amattayi's words that Topparu's son was coming, but she only saw Topparu's wife murmuring. She also must be mad.

SUICIDES, ERASURES AND OBLIVION

The instance of the youngster who used to observe the village from the desolate boat shaped river islet during night, leaving his beloved Yelluram is depicted as the suicide of the young Cartographer at the age of twenty nine. Once somebody leaves the village, it is nothing short of erasing the existence of that person from the memories and lores of Yelluram.

The suicide (or leaving the land) of the Cartographer was only to recover, decenter and deconstruct the human cartographs discovered by him in Yelluram. He could continue his narration through the Reader with the aid of his wide and deep reading. When the turbulent 2018 Kerala floods substituted the moral and ethical values of the land, the characters formed in the Cartographer's mind were also erased by him, in order to bring them into literature. A people with no recorded history or geography when converted into literary mythemes found a place in the world literature and they were lifted from regional history into a world history.

The mythification of these gender-similar personalities are done in minimum meta-sentences, that too without any details or descriptions, but the pain and melancholy passing through them persist to exist as open wounds.

A youngster who had lost his job as well as his parents had ventured to take up cartography of humans as a profession after being influenced by Dostoevsky, Alejo Carpentier and Deleuze. When the Cartographer found that the characters of Yelluram lived in their dreams, he

closed his doors to open life in a midnight on the ground that the best decision for them forever was to annihilate their creator.

After the death of the twenty nine year old Cartographer, his twenty nine year old Reader also knew each and every character of Yelluram.

When the Reader's wife abandoned him, he went mad and was admitted in Room No. 29 of a sanatorium. He forced on himself to believe that he was dead. His wife also accused him to be mad. Thereafter he decided to own the lives of the abandoned people everywhere who were never claimed by anybody. Once again he became the boy who held his mother's hand, came out of his wild madness and decided to address the characters of Yelluram.

The Reader knew that these characters were also his dreams. He wanted to deconstruct their stories from words and graphs into cartographs. But he could not find the door shut out by his predecessor Cartographer, in order to open it. The Cartographer possessed him instead.

Era had got a five year old girl from the very place where the two girls were found in the paddy field. She grew the child up and married her to a fit youngster. The flood had already begun that day. Kallayi with a radio and the two girls came to her. She saw their prophet Mittel leaving the land. She felt Yelluram sinking. Radio broadcasts warned imminent flood. Kallayi slept in the house surrounded by water. He awoke to see outside the Cartographer who had committed suicide for them. He said that he could not find equality that he dreamt of

anywhere there and that he was about to take back Yelluram, and it should not exist the next day onwards. The water level gradually crawled upwards.

Everybody could hear the message of the Cartographer. They were content and did not raise any revolt. They found that they lived their lives lively better than anybody else and were only happy to die with him. It rained cats and dogs. The flood fully covered Yelluram revealing the water map of Yelluram above everything else, and denoting the eradication of caste as well, just like the movement of silence.

STYLISTICS

Yelluram has its goal of feminist power; yet it creates equally handsome male characters. Power, sex and identity, apart from revolution, form the basic anvils and cornerstones of existential issues addressed in this novel. Even when people raise slogans, they submit to their tragic life experiences. Yelluram has its own philosophy of womanist power and identity.

Plain language, complex narration, lively poetical imageries, extraordinary structure and proper characterization make Yelluram a unique experience. Stylistic elements often lead us to a thought that there has been nothing similar earlier and there shall never be in future. Very often readers experience a style that can be treated as “a Joyce simplified.”

CONCLUSION

Yelluram is a novel capable of bringing a new style and sensibility in not only Malayalam literature, but also the Indian literature as a whole. Its combination of

surrealistic, post-modern and post-structuralist trends produce an entirely new stuff, which cannot go unnoticed. Even though it is the author's first novel, V R Santhosh, the well known poet, translator, painter and critic proves beyond doubt that he is a well versed gifted novelist knowing the crux of creating novels of the first quality.

